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An Open Letter to List Articles

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An Open Letter to List Articles

By Nathan Holic
UCF Forum columnist
Thursday, November 7, 2013

Dear List Articles,

You are killing us.

You: the List Article. You know who you are. The type of article shared on Facebook at an every-other-status-update clip: “The 5 Best Pumpkin-Flavored Specialties This Season” and “20 Important Speeches Interrupted By Kanye West” and “The 17 Grisliest Death Scenes From ‘80s Slasher Movies” and “22 Things *Right Behind You* That Could Kill You *Right Now*.” The List Article: an urgent and imploring photo-slideshow that pairs arbitrary numbers with timely subjects, all topped with hyperbolic adjectives that we simply can’t ignore (usually the list is deemed the “best” or “worst” of something, but sometimes it’s “sexiest” or “ugliest,” or maybe “deadliest” or “most likely to ruin your life if you don’t immediately click this link”).

And listen, I know what you’re thinking: that my choice to write an open letter is lame because they’re overdone too, the Internet having doubled in size simply from the number of open letters written to Miley Cyrus post-twerk. You’re thinking that a quick Google search for “open letters” reveals 923 million results, including such gems as “An Open Letter to Sinead O’Connor re: her open letter to Miley Cyrus.” I get it. Open Letters are no longer a novelty. And whatever shred of honesty they might have had, whatever shred of positive purpose, disappeared when the Open Letter became a genre more suitable for celebrity-focused rants than for allowing underprivileged voices to invoke a public platform and speak truth to power. I get all of that.

But you know what? Despite any misgivings at my choice of genre for this article, I want to reinforce that it is *you*, List Article, at whom we should direct our scorn.

What's that, you say? You don't have the attention span to read a full letter? Would it help if I *listed* the reasons for your awfulness—just so *you* can understand? If I included headers and numbers, too? Fine.

(1) **You don't care if you are useful. You only care if you generate "clicks."** The other day I clicked on a list purporting to reveal which everyday foods I'm eating that I'd never expect to be unhealthy. "Oh no!" I said. "Please don't tell me that orange juice made the list? Or romaine lettuce? I must click the link and learn how to save myself!" The List Article revealed to me, however, that it is unhealthy to eat cheeseburgers and drink milkshakes. And still tens of thousands of readers were suckered into clicking through the slideshow for that useless information. You win, List Article. You win every time.

(2) **Your true purpose is to waste time.** Even worse, most readers don't even expect enlightenment from you. You are a workday diversion. You're content for the sake of content, empty eye candy to fill our screens. Editors and writers know that you're just "click bait" designed to get shared, so why bother with something artful or thought-provoking or necessary? Just create a list of "Best Cereals" and get us arguing for hours on comment boards about Cookie Crisp vs. Count Chocula.

(3) **You teach us to *demand less of what we read*.** You rarely offer us anything new, often just appropriating content from other sources, condensing "tips" and "analysis" from lengthier articles and books. You're no better than skim milk cut with water, a distant and diluted relative of the original flavor. But because you're brief in text and colorful in layout, and ask us only for minimal investment, we not only accept your lack of real utility and value, but actually get *disappointed* when other texts require more of us.

We live in a world where everyone is constantly too busy, somehow multitasking in five different mediums at once. Texting while driving is actually the least dangerous thing we do. I see people texting while *eating breakfast* while driving (and really, they're not even texting: they're checking two different email accounts, and Facebook, and college football scores, and Words with Friends). We live in a world so digitally overwhelming that it's become a major victory to clear our email inbox, or to clear the red notifications on our iPhones.

List Article, I know that you didn't create the Internet, or the smart phone, or the culture of immediacy, but you've become our worst offender in asking us to drop what we're doing *right now*, and *click here*, and *don't worry because it will be quick and then you can get back to what you were doing*, and also, never mind the three minutes we just wasted reading "10 Unexpected Celebrity Coke-Heads," or the five minutes reading "Top Presents For Your Dog This Christmas," because maybe tomorrow we'll discover a list of "15 Easy Ways to Increase Productivity."

List Article, I know you didn't *create* our busy lifestyles, but you've caused too many of us to undervalue the experience of *real* reading, to question whether we have the time. Because you waste our time in quick five-minute increments, we don't see that you're stealing 30 minutes a day, 40. We don't see that you're actually making us busier. And in your rise to popularity, you've trained too many of us to think that brevity is the *only* virtue of good writing, that content should only be delivered in ever-decreasing chunks of text, that reading should not require our full attention, should not be challenging.

You sap our critical faculties. You kill our ability to focus.

To read an in-depth and immersive article or essay or biography or novel is an act of commitment, an exercise in patience. It requires that we sit, breathe, shut out the noise, *think*. It is one of our few easy defenses against the head-exploding craziness of our culture of immediacy.

List Articles: I wish I could give you advice about how to improve.

But remember, this is an Open Letter. It's not really about you.

It's about all of *us*, everyone reading. It's about how we'll choose to spend our time, what else we'll choose to read. The world is a big place, a complex place, and we need our brains back if we're going to make positive contributions to it.

Sincerely,

Nathan Holic

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